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Housing an obstacle to violence victims

By Dorie Turner Staff Writer

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Housing is one of the most difficult barriers facing victims of domestic violence, an advocate told members of the Chattanooga Area Fair Housing Roundtable on Tuesday.

Debra House, associate director of Legal Aid of East Tennessee, said abused women typically don't have the money or the credit record to secure housing for themselves once they leave their abuser.

"When they decide to leave, where do they go?" said Ms. House, a member of the board for the Coalition Against Domestic and Community Violence of Greater Chattanooga. "Shelters are a wonderful service, but they're time-limited. They're not intended to be a long-term living solution."

Most shelters have a four- to six-week time limit, and very few of the smaller cities in the Chattanooga area offer transitional housing for victims, she said. Without a place to live, women can have their children taken away by the state, Ms. House said.

Many of the cities in the region have waiting lists for public housing, but federal standards no longer give preferences to people in extreme situations, such as domestic violence victims, she said. In Cleveland, Tenn., public housing is full, she said.

Fear of losing their children or not having a place to go is part of the reason women stay in abusive relationships, she said.

Russell Fowler, who also works with Legal Aid and is chairman of the roundtable, said it's important that landlords understand how to help domestic violence victims rather than add to their problems.

"They need somebody to have faith in them long enough to get back on their feet," Mr. Fowler said.

Mr. Fowler prosecutes cases where public housing tenants have been evicted because of domestic problems. It is against federal fair housing regulations to discriminate against someone because they are a victim of domestic violence, he said.

Gail Pollock, executive director of Habitat for Humanity of Greater Chattanooga, said the people applying for her housing are typically single women with children. It's difficult for her agency to determine if credit problems that show up are because of an abuser, she said.

"It's hard to tell what's just their income," Ms. Pollock said. "Should we be looking at other issues that may be adversely affecting their credit?"

The roundtable meets every other month. The group is composed of people involved in housing in the Chattanooga and surrounding area.